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The Method of Instruction Pursued With Helen Keller a Valuable Study for Teachers of the Deaf.

By Dr. Alexander Graham Bell.

To the Editors of the Silent Educator. Flint, Mich.

The great problem that confronts us in this country is, how to impart to the deaf a knowledge of idiomatic English. It must be admitted by all who have come in contact with Helen Keller that this problem has been solved in the case of at least one deaf child, not yet twelve years of age; and I therefore agree with the opinion you have expressed in the May number of The Silent Educator, that teachers of the deaf should study very carefully the method of instruction pursued in the case of Helen Keller. The difficulty of the problem must have been enormously increased in her case, by the fact that she has been totally blind, as well as deaf, from infancy. On the other hand, her unusual intellectual abilities have been of undoubted advantage.

We must not run away with the idea, however, that exceptional intellectual powers could alone account for the phenomenon. No mind, however richly endowed, could possibly intuitively arrive at a knowledge of idiomatic English expressions. It is absolutely certain that such expressions must have been taught to her before she could use them. It is, then, a question of instruction that we have to consider, and not a case of supernatural acquirement. Among the thousands of children in our schools for the deaf who are not hampered by the additional misfortune of blindness, there are surely some who are

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intellectually as capable of mastering the intricacies of the English language as Helen herself.

If, then, we can find none who have in an equal period of time acquired a knowledge of idiomatic English comparable to hers, we should seek the explanation in the difference between the methods of instruction employed. Let every teacher compare Miss Sullivan's statements with the methods of instruction now in use, and note the difference.

In the first place, it is obvious that Helen's remarkable command of language is not due to any knowledge of the sign language; for she knows nothing of it. Nor is it due to oral instruction; for she had acquired complete mastery of the English Language before she was taught to speak. Miss Sullivan's method approximates most closely to the "American Vernacular Method" used in the Western New York Institution. She employed the manual alphabet exclusively as a means of communication up to the period when Helen was taught to speak. She adopted the principle of talking to Helen just as she would to a seeing and hearing child, spelling into her hands the words and sentences she would have spoken to her if she could have heard, in spite of the fact that at first much of the language was unintelligible to the child. She did not pick and choose her words, but by frequent repetition of complete sentences containing ordinary idiomatic expressions, she sought to impress the language upon the child's memory and thus lead her gradually to imitate it.

The chief difference between Miss Sullivan's method and that pursued in the Western New York Institution is to be found in the use she has made of books as a means of teaching the language. Miss Sullivan says:—

"I gave her books printed in raised letters *long before she could read them*, and she would amuse herself for hours each day in carefully passing her fingers over the words searching for such as she knew, and would scream with delight whenever she found one."

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Before, then, Helen had the ability to understand very much of the English language, complete words and sentences containing ordinary idiomatic expressions were constantly presented to her sense of touch in two ways:

1. By the conversation of her teacher.
2. By the presentation of books.

The first plan is substantially the method adopted in the Rochester school; but the second is unique, and has never before, to my knowledge, been put into practical operation; although the idea is familiar to the profession and has been frequently discussed from a theoretical point of view. It is safe to say that no pupil of the Rochester school, however brilliantly endowed in mind, has exhibited a knowledge of the English language comparable to that possessed by Helen after an equal period of instruction; hence, the second plan adopted by Miss Sullivan is probably responsible for the difference of result.

This conclusion is confirmed by the fortunate discovery by the *Goodson Gazette* of the origin of much of the language employed in Helen's remarkable story of the "Frost King." Indeed, this discovery has given us the key to the solution of the problem in Helen's case, and we may now hold it as conclusively proved that she owes her exceptional knowledge of language largely to the influence of books. She talks and writes the language of the books she has read, or the books that have been read to her by spelling the words into her hand. In nearly all her compositions we can trace this influence. Miss Sullivan says:

"In selecting books for Helen to read it has never occurred to me to choose them with reference to her misfortune I have read to her such publications as other children of her age read and take delight in, and the same rule has been observed in placing in her hands books. printed in raised letters. * * * In regard to the quantity and quality of books furnished Helen before she knew many words, I cannot give a list that will be of much value to teachers of the deaf, as on account of Helen's double misfortune she could not be

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supplied as deaf children can who have the sense of sight with a selection from the almost limitless number of beautifully printed and illustrated books for children of all ages which our book stores so generously display."

If, as I believe, Miss Sullivan is right in her opinion that "Helen's remarkable command of language is due to the fact that books printed in raised letters were placed in her hands as soon as she knew the formation of the letters," the discovery is one of enormous importance to teachers of the deaf, for it shows us a method of instruction capable of application to all deaf children, whatever other means of teaching may be employed. Let books be used in the school-room from the very beginning of education. The subjects should be adapted to the age of the child, but the language not chosen with special reference to his misfortune. From the multitude of books printed for the use of hearing and speaking children we can surely, more easily, make a suitable selection for the use of our pupils, than Miss Sullivan could do, when she was limited to books printed in raised letters for the use of the blind.

The great principle that Miss Sullivan seems to have had in mind in the instruction of Helen is one that appears obvious enough when it is once formulated, and one with which we are all familiar as the principle involved in the acquisition of language by ordinary hearing and speaking children. It is simply this: *That language is acquired by imitation*. This means that language must be presented to deaf children before it is understood; the children must be familiarized with the model before they have anything to imitate.

In regard to Helen Keller Miss Sullivan says:

"I talked to her almost incessantly in her waking hours; spelled into her hand a description of what was transpiring around us, what I saw, what I was doing, what others were doing anything, everything. Of course, in doing this I used multitudes of words she did not at the time understand, and the exact definition of which I did not pause to explain; but I never abbreviated or omitted words, but spelled all my sentences carefully and correctly."

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In communicating with our pupils also, let us use English, and English alone. Not English—stilted in expression and carefully lowered to the level of the deaf child's comprehension—but ordinary idiomatic English—such as we employ, with ordinary hearing and speaking children.

In oral schools this is already done, the spoken language of the people being the language of communication and thought. In manual schools let written English be the language of conversation. Spell upon your fingers the complete and idiomatic expressions you would say to your children if they could hear. In both manual and oral schools supplement your English conversation by the reading of books.

Present volumes of words to your pupils in the shape of printed pages, and you will get that frequency of repetition to the eye that is essential in order to impress the language on the memory. Little of the language at first will be comprehended, for it is obvious that the deaf child must see the language before he understands it, just as a hearing child must hear language before he can imitate it. Ordinary children learn to understand by frequent hearing, and deaf children will come to know the meaning of words and phrases by constant seeing; just as Helen has come to know their meaning by incessant repetition to the sense of touch.

The chief lesson, I think, to be learned from the case of Helen Keller is the importance of books *in the earlier stages of education*, as a means of supplementing and re-enforcing the instruction of the teacher.

The success in her case, gives force to the theoretical opinion I expressed in by paper upon “reading as a means of teaching language to the deaf”:—

“ I would have a deaf child read books in order to learn the language instead of learning the language in order to read books.

FROM THE SCHOOLS.

Governor Nichols recently visited the Louisiana School.

Plate engraving is taught to the pupils at the Monitoba School.

The *Silent Press* is being removed from Dayton, Ohio, to Chicago.

Some of the pupils at the Mississippi School are taught type writing.

One of the pupils at the Louisiana Shool is a deaf, dumb and blind boy.

Douglas Tilden's Tired Boxer has been purchased by the Olympic Club, of San Francisco for \$3,000.

Mr. S. L. Hagny, of Keokuk, Iowa, has donated a valuable collection of books to the Iowa School.

The degree of Master of Arts was recently conferred upon the Fellows at the National Deaf Mute College.

The new North Carolina School for the Deaf will be completed and ready for occupancy by September first.

A fine collection of plaster casts has been purchased for use in the Art Department at the Minnesota School.

A son of Mr. Veatch, foreman of the shoe shop at the Kentucky School, was shot and fatally wounded recently.

All of the Fellows at the National Deaf Mute College have secured situations in Schools for the coming year.

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Mr. A. D. Hayes, a teacher, in the West Virginia School, was recently elected a member of the common council of Romney.

Arbor day was observed at the Wisconsin School. A nicely arranged program was carried out and a holiday given the pupils.

Mr. Wirt A. Scott, the Fellow at the National College from Mississippi, has accepted a teacher's position in the Texas School for the coming year.

Miss Camp, teacher in the Western Pennsylvania Institution, is on the sick list. She will probably not resume her duties until autumn.

Mr. Samuel M. Freeman, teacher in the Georgia Institution, has been selected as orator at the Ohio Alumni reunion, to be held in September.

Mr. S. R. Clark, of Delaware, Ohio, has been selected to succeed Superintendent Knott, at the Ohio School for the Deaf. He will take charge on August first.

A small fire occurred at the Lexington Avenue School for the Deaf, New York City, on the 14th ult. Prompt action saved the building from destruction.

Principal Wyckoff, of the Iowa School, visited several schools for the deaf during the past month, inspecting the educational work of the different Schools.

The summer meeting of the Association for the Promotion of the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf will be held at Lake George, beginning on the 29th of June.

It is rumored that Rev. Dr. Gallaudet contemplates resigning the rectorship of St. Ann's Church, New York. Should this prove true he will devote his entire time to deaf-mute church Mission work.

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The Washingtonian, a recently established newspaper for the deaf, is published at the Washington School for the Deaf and is edited by Mr. J. C. Watson.

Mr. Guy M. Wilcox, one of the Fellows at the National Deaf-Mute College, has been engaged to teach at the Minnesota School for the ensuing year.

Mr. C. A. Deems, Editor of the *Mississippi Voice*, was married on the 11th ult. to Miss Hattie Hoover. Mrs. Deems was educated at the Mississippi School. Congratulations.

A. Ben-Hur exhibition was recently given in Omaha, by the pupils and persons connected with the Nebraska School. It was a great success and there is a great demand for its reproduction.

Work is begun and is being pushed forward vigorously on the new buildings for the R. I. School for the Deaf. It is expected that they will be ready for occupancy at the opening of school in the autumn.

The work of the annual examinations at the close of the year are being preserved this year at the Michigan School and will constitute that schools exhibit in this line at the World's Columbian Exposition.

Miss Anna C. Allen has been appointed acting Principal of the Milwaukee Day School for the Deaf during the absence of Principal Paul Binner. The school now has about thirty pupils and we are credibly informed is in excellent condition, which fact is due to the tirelessly devoted enthusiasm and interest of its efficient Principal, Mr. Binner.

The teachers of the primary department of the Iowa School, recently started the publication of a daily paper, called the *News*. It is designed to encourage reading among the younger pupils. So far the experiment is successful.

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The first brick for the new School for the Deaf at Morgantown, N. C., was laid on May 16th. Appropriate exercises consisting of speeches and singing were held. The first brick was laid by two little children, a girl of ten years of age and a boy of about the same age.

Mr. Tate, of the Missouri School, has had a number of model sentences printed on Manilla board, in type large enough to be seen at quite a distance. The sentences were selected by the teachers and will be hung in the school rooms of the primary department to be used in language teaching.

The Principals' Conference which had been announced to be held in Colorado Springs July 9–16, is postponed until the middle of August. The inability of the committee to secure lower rates for the delegates than one and one-third fare for the round trip is the cause of the postponement. By deferring the conference to the middle of August, all who attend can avail themselves of the rate granted for the Knights Templar Conclave to be held in Denver at that time.

The *Silent Educator* for the month of May is at hand. It is still to all intents and purposes a practical school-room journal, worth, not its quantity, but quality in gold. It also discusses propositions affecting the welfare of the Deaf. The leading controversy just now is over the relative merits of the combined and oral systems. Our side has a brilliant set who are forcing back to the wall the advocates of oralism with cutting logic, and challenging with effect their sweeping claims. We admire such men, not because they happened to be on our side, but because, instead of vacillating, they promptly resent unwarranted aggression from the enemy with a courage worthy of imitation in any cause, and with angelic patience considering the blind partizanism of their opponents. Particularly do we admire the style of Mr. Dudley, of the Colorado Institution, which, while it is slashing, should be the one adopted in such controversies—earnest and uncompromising, concise and meaty, and free from abuse of whatsoever kind.— *West Virginia Tablet*.

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As the teacher so the pupils. Everywhere by their actions your pupils be-speak the character of their teacher. In the chapel, in the study-room, in the halls through their behavior they publish to the world your efficiency as a teacher and your ability as a disciplinarian.

Wanted, an experienced articulation teacher. Address with references.

Mary B. C. Brown, Prin. Pa. Oral School for the Deaf, *Scranton, Pa.*